SCRIPTA JUDAICA CRACOVIENSIA
Vol. 13 (2015) pp. 93–112
doi:10.4467/20843925SJ.15.008.4230
www.ejournals.eu/Scripta-Judaica-Cracoviensia

Demonology at the Crossroads. The Presence and Significance of Non-Jewish Beliefs within Ashkenazi Folklore[1]

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Key words: folklore, demonology, medicine, Jewish-Slavic relations

Abstract: The article deals with the subject of popular demonology as a space of symbolic contact between Jewish culture and the largely Slavic surrounding culture(s) in the Eastern Europe. It brings together two main themes – the presence of Christian beliefs about witchcraft, and demonic representations of diseases (e.g. *kolten*, *hartsvorem*, etc.) – as seen and evaluated within the Ashkenazi milieu at the turn of the 20th century. Based on print and handwritten sources of various origins, the article presents examples of extensive intercultural contact, emphasizing their scope and meaning, as well as their limitations, in historical/cultural context.

The problem of Jewish-Slavic cultural contacts attracted much attention in the final decades of the last century, and inspired a visible turn in scholarship beginning with the "polysystem theory" created originally for literature studies, and ending with recent concepts of "cultural frontier."[2] In Chone Shmeruk's case study of the *Esterke* story, a pioneering work at the time of its publication in the 1980s, the author discusses two neighboring traditions, focusing mainly on their literary dimensions. As Shmeruk points out, contact between Jewish and Christian populations was almost entirely limited to the economic sphere, with an otherwise virtual cultural wall existing between Polish Jews and non-Jews, preventing open cultural exchange in other domains. But folklore could mutually affect both groups due to its oral transmission. Yet Shmeruk saw such influences as having limited culture-building impact, and therefore did not occupy himself with it in his own analysis.[3] Ever since Adam Teller expanded the conception of the *shtetl* from the insular, exclusively Jewish space it had long been treated as, viewing it instead as an integral part of social landscape of the Polish-Lithuanian state,[4] the need for an intercultural approach to Jewish history in the Eastern Europe became clear. Mary Louise Pratt's notion of a *contact zone* is useful here, as it offers a framework for understanding

[1] I would like to thank Professor Erica Lehrer of Concordia University for comments and suggestions regarding the article.

[2] This changes affected both historic and cultural studies, cf. Rosman 2007; Prokop-Janiec 2013, pp. 15-43.

[3] Shmeruk 1895, pp. 46-47. I use the term 'Ashkenazi folklore' to denote the sphere of popular culture expressed in its variety by the traditionally oriented Yiddish-speaking Jewry. Alan Dundes (1999, pp. 5-8) indicated that "oral transmission is a common but not absolutely essential factor in defining folklore." This opinion seems true regarding Jewish, as well as non-Jewish culture in Eastern Europe.

[4] Teller 2004, pp. 25-40.

intercultural encounter in social as well as symbolic terms.[5] Even if Jewish-Slavic meetings centered around economic activities, their substance was generally much broader and involved also other spheres of culture. This article focuses on intercultural contacts and exchange with regard to popular demonology, using representations of demons and witches as expressed by the traditional Ashkenazi community living among (largely) Slavic population of Christian (Catholic and Orthodox) faith as an entryway to the broader question of Jewish-Slavic mutual influence.

It is important to stress that beliefs about demonic intervention in the world order have been discussed in relation to folklore only since the 19th century. However, their presence in European culture dates back at least as far as the middle ages, when demons and witches played a prominent role in popular worldviews. As Jane P. Davidson notes in the introduction to her book *Early Modern Supernatural*: "Beliefs in evil or demonic supernatural entities and events were a large component of European art and literature. Many books were written on the dark side subjects of devils, witches, ghosts, possession, exorcism and black magic."[6] Unlike today, such literature did not occupy a separate shelf – neither of "fiction" nor "folklore" – it was not categorized in such way. Rather, it reflected the general popular contexts of the world of its creators – ideas and practices that intertwined with all other human activities. The Hyppocratic and Galenic medical traditions that had been predominant in the European thought before the 18th century had been merged with supernatural ones. Natural and magical remedies were used simultaneously, sometimes depending on each other. Even after the development of modern medicine based on biological sciences, magic continued to influence healing practices, and the "dark side" occupied an important place in European culture. Thus, the study of concepts seemingly existing only on the margin of the modern perception should not be obscured by the traditional guise of the gathered data.

The topic of non-Jewish roots of certain aspects of Ashkenazi folklore cannot be regarded as a new one. Even within the geographic framework of Central and Eastern Europe, this subject has attracted the attention of numerous scholars including Max Grunwald, Max Weinreich, Yehuda Leyb Cahan and much later Haya Bar-Itzhak and Olga Belova among others. Rather than reiterating the earlier debates, then, this article will focus on two aspects of intercultural contact rarely mentioned in current Jewish Studies literature, and only in a limited way in modern discourse on Jewish-Slavic relations before the Holocaust. These points of interest include the presence of Christian beliefs on witchcraft and of demonic representations of diseases in Ashkenazi folklore, particularly in its medical sphere. The former aspect will elucidate a number of important aspects of Slavic and generally Christian influences on the ways that witches and sorcerers were presented in Jewish narratives. The latter aspect examines less prominent diseases treated by folk medicine, beyond cholera or "the evil eye," both of which have been thoroughly treated by scholars. Based on these analyses, the article argues for rec-

[5] Mary Louise Pratt (1992, p. 7) defined *contact zone* as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." Although the term was coined within modern post-colonial studies, it can be also adapted to social and cultural circumstances discussed in this article.

[6] Davidson 2012, p. 2.

ognizing the profound significance of non-Jewish, mainly Central and Eastern European, beliefs about the "dark side" in the popular culture of Eastern Ashkenaz, as well as the reach and restriction of this exogenous cultural influence.

Witchcraft at the Jewish-Christian frontier

The concept of witchcraft, as well as the belief in the existence of individuals with special powers in this domain ("black magic" or *maleficium*, magical acts intended to hurt people or ruin their property), has been present in many cultures in different geographic, religious, and social environments. Similar supernatural representations have been visible in Jewish and Christian mythologies that for hundreds of years coexisted on a confined territory, though each group constructed these ideas in its own way. Both cultures that dominated Eastern Europe before the Holocaust explained the meaning of witchcraft in close connection to other components of their idiosyncratic worldview, notably with religious values and symbols. The Hebrew term *machshefa* (Yiddish *a makhsheyfe*, a witch) appeared already in the bible, in a verse from Shemot: "Do not allow the sorceress to live" (22, 17). The same passage entered Jewish magical practices and was quoted extensively on protective amulets as well as in magical incantations intended to neutralize *kishufim* (sorcery). Witches mentioned in the Scripture, and to some extent also those portrayed by the Talmudic sages, appeared to be engaged in maleficent acts against the people of Israel or individuals. Although occupied with forbidden lore, they were devoid of demonic features. Instead, witchcraft was associated with idolatry, a counterweight to the miracles worked by prophets, with the blessing of the Only God. Various holders of impure magical powers were portrayed as royal courtiers or members of royal families, but their acts against God's order did not go without punishment.

In the Talmudic era accusations of magical practices, not necessarily the harmful kind, arose frequently in relation to various activities of Jewish women. The Sages referred to witchcraft as their wives' natural, though inappropriate, attribute, a sort of inherent feminine proficiency. Although practicing black magic was not exclusively the prerogative of women – according to Rashi the biblical quotation from Shemot concerned both sexes – Jewish tradition still pointed out various reasons for the use of feminine gender in this specific passage and its hidden meanings.[7] Rabbis of previous generations, including Rashi, argued, that women "are most commonly witches," also pointing at menstruation as a supposedly visible sign of predisposition toward witchcraft. According to *Kav ha-Yashar*, a moral instruction manual published at the beginning of the 18th century, in periods of ritual impurity demons gathered on woman's nails. The author Zevi Hirsh Koidanover counted exactly one thousand four hundred and fifty kinds of such evil creatures and warned that some witches willingly postponed planned actions for that particular time.[8] However, there were also other explanations, much more deeply

[7] Bar-Ilan 1993, pp. 7-32.

[8] Koidanover 1864/65, pp. 49-50. The period of pregnancy and birth, as well as of serious sickness, generated similar beliefs in special magical power, possessed by a pregnant/sick (ritually impure) woman. Curses thrown by such person were expected to cause harm and bring various misfortunes.

rooted in written tradition. The apocrypha (1 Henoch), midrashic literature, and – later on – many popular publications (for instance, *Tsene-Urene*, written in the Yiddish vernacular), interpreted the origins of women's attraction to black magic in accordance with the passage of Bereshit (6, 2), the story of the fallen angels. Two of those angels, Aza (also Shemhazai) and Azael, not only opposed God and took human women as wives, but also taught them the secret manipulations of the Holy Name.[9] Such manipulations constituted an emblematic feature of Jewish magical traditions, though they were associated with kabbalists rather than female witches.

The attitude toward witchcraft changed significantly in medieval Ashkenaz among Jewish communities scattered across southern and western German speaking provinces. Although the Talmudic speculations on women's magical dispositions lived on, finding their equivalent in the pagan idea of a "wise woman" (German *Hexe*, Polish *wiedźma*), they were usually accompanied by beliefs of origins different then biblical or rabbinic. In late Middle Ages the predominant view on witches within the Christian milieu presented them as representatives of both sexes (also referred to as sorcerers), people of every social strata and age – from young landlords to old midwives. Witches were thought to draw their powers from Satan, whom they worshipped after renouncing Christianity, and therefore their conduct resembled a clear opposition to the values shared by the society. The acts of *maleficia* included harming people and destroying property, along with blasphemy and sexual debauchery, generally viewed as acts of hostility, that posed a danger not only to an individual, but also to the social order in general. Moreover, witches and sorcerers obtained clearly demonic qualities: being able to transform into other entities, to fly or relocate rapidly in long distances, to feed on human blood etc. Such portrait of a witch entered *Sefer Hasidim*, an essential source of knowledge about medieval Ashkenaz, attributed to Judah he-Hasid of Regensburg (c. 1150-1217). The book devoted a significant number of passages to the matter of demonic activity and nature of witches. It did so not always refer directly to *machshefot*, but also characterized other supernatural events and peculiarities. The use of non-Jewish terms describing female witches *estrie* (from Latin *strix*, a night owl), as well as presenting those creatures in circumstances strikingly similar to situations depicted in books published within the Christian surrounding, suggest that already in the 12th and 13th century the popular demonology was a space of significant cultural exchange. In the following centuries much evidence supporting this notion appeared in print, some written by prominent figures of European Jewry. The most notable publication was Menasseh ben Israel's *Nishmat Chayyim*, a book in which the Dutch rabbi revealed his views on witchcraft, which were almost indistinguishable from beliefs expressed by Christian authors.[10]

Although Christians ascribed witchcraft mainly to heretics or, simply put, those who abandoned Christ and submitted to His eternal enemy, popular culture at the time presented this belief from other angles as well. Jews were perceived similarly to witches and sorcerers, particularly as outsiders to traditional social and religious hierarchy and as strangers who possessed a catalog of potentially magical utensils (books, a foreign alphabet and language, Tefillin, etc.). Modern scholarship proves how enduring this stereotypical profile remained among Christian population of the Eastern Europe even af-

[9] Ashkenazi 1889, p. 25; Lew 1896, p. 306. Cf. Graves, Patai 2005, pp. 100-107.

[10] Trachtenberg 1939, pp. 13-14.

ter the Holocaust.[11] At the same time, Jewish culture constructed its own image of the stranger that took the final shape in the feudal reality of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and persisted among the most traditionally oriented spheres of Ashkenazi Jewry until the first decades of the 20th century. This image was further reinforced by religious differences. "Otherness", a trait implying associations with demons and witches for Jews as well, was similarly demonstrated most clearly through unknown rituals and strange symbols, in this case the Latin alphabet, the cross, portraits and figures of Christian saints, etc. Jewish folklore and memoirs preserved a multitude of testimonies recounting tensions between Jews and the "other" in the common space of the provincial town. Depictions of such tensions, "translated" into struggles between two supernatural powers, reveal substantial intercultural contacts that exceed the economic sphere. A story told in Maków Mazowiecki focuses around a parcel of land occupied by a cross, "a memorial and a *segulah* [mystical remedy] after a plague from the old times." When the Hasidic Rebbe Levi Itzhak of Berditchev, during his visit to the shtetl, marked this very square as suitable for a "Holy Place," unnatural winds and storms blew the cross away, thus the local Jewish community was able to negotiate moving the memorial and building a new synagogue.[12] According to another record, a woman from village Serafińce near Horodenka in (today's) Ukraine instructed her daughter: "Az me geyt farbay a yoyzl, darf men dray mol oysshpayen un zogn: *shakets teshaktseynu*... Nor men darf zikh hitn, di goyim zoln dos nisht zen..." (If one passes by a crucifix, they need to spit three times and say: *shakets teshaktseynu* – loathe it totally [Devarim 7, 26] – but one must be careful, the gentiles shall not notice). The act of spitting emphasizes the apotropaic character of the custom, as it was intended not only to outline intercultural delimitation, but also to work as a protection from strangeness, understood as a manifestation of the "dark side."[13]

In Jewish folk imagination the most dangerous sorcerers and witches were the representatives of Christian clergy, catholic and orthodox priests, as well as members of Polish elites – aristocrats of both sexes. Therefore, it was common to undertake a number of preventive measures at their sight: by showing the fig sign (mostly behind the back or in a pocket), throwing a metal pin (possibly to "stab" the evil), uttering an exorcism etc.[14] According to *Shivchei ha-Besht*, an original collection of stories about the alleged founder of Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov (Besht) was once asked to help a local Jewish community that happened to be in conflict with a priest. Although in the end he proved victorious, initially he did not want to engage against a "great sorcerer."[15] A significant category of witches comprised famous individuals including magnates, emperors and popes. According to Hasidic stories about Leybl ben Sarah, one of the first Tsaddikim from Hungary, he waged a sort of magical challenge against the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, supposedly a holder of great powers.[16]

[11] It is worth mentioning such studies, as Cała 1995 and Michlic 2006, to mention only those published in English.

[12] Hilert 1969, pp. 182-183.

[13] Hofman-Shen 1963, p. 266.

[14] Lilientalowa 1898, p. 279; Lilientalowa 1900, p. 640; Fayvushinski 1958, p. 200; cf. Moszyński 1934, p. 290.

[15] *Sefer sziwchej haBeszt. Księga ku chwale Baal Szem Towa*, 2011, pp. 186-187; Meisels 1993, pp. 5-14.

[16] Even 1917, p. 77.

Despite the fact that, as mentioned earlier, in Jewish imagination symbols of Christianity were primarily associated with otherness or strangeness and consequently also with witchcraft, some sources verify this image in a manner typical for popular notions of "the other." Although it was rather rare, in Ashkenazi folklore one can find descriptions of Christianity as a beneficent power in the face of "black magic." The belief was based generally on a conviction, that the "other" is likewise subjected to God's will, or "carries God in his heart," and it found its expression in a popular Yiddish saying, that "Mit a goy, vos tseylemt zikh nit, darf men banakht in a boyd nit forn" (it is not wise to ride at night with a cart with a gentile who does not make a sign of cross [before a trip]). Presumably, the rare documented cases of Jews wearing crosses and Mother of God medallions within the Jewish folklore, or burning candles in a church may also be interpreted as taking advantage of the magical power of the "other." Despite the fact that most Hebrew or Yiddish written testimonies describe acts of *maleficia* turned against Jews, it is also possible to trace stories focused, at least in some measure, on gentile victims of witchcraft. Such examples are not numerous, since the purpose of their recounting emphasized the needs of the in-group. Yehuda Yudl Rosenberg, a rabbi, writer and collector of traditions, published in a booklet dedicated to the Hasidic Rebbe Eliyahu Gutmacher of Greyditz (Grodzisk Wielkopolski) a story about a Jewish boy possessed by souls of four witches. The author based the narrative on a testimony recorded by Rebbe Eliyahu himself in a book *Tsafnat-Paaneach*,[17] but broadened it and enriched significantly with interesting details. The story starts with a conflict between a witch living on the outskirts of a village, a mother of three daughters, and non-Jewish peasants. After suffering from their evil deeds, the local population is determined to treat the problem with a radical solution. The women accused of witchcraft die in a fire and their bodies are prohibited from burial on a *smentazh* (gentile cemetery), so the sinful souls wander around and later become *dibbukim*.[18] In the variant of the story published by Rosenberg, the non-Jewish witches turn at the end against Jews.

Witches, werewolves, vampires

There is significant evidence that Ashkenazi culture shared popular beliefs on the nature of witchcraft that were prominent among Slavic Eastern Europeans, despite the distance it expressed toward Christianity. For example, the traditional Jewish population demonstrated familiarity with witches, gathering at night on a top of a bald mountain, being intimate with devils and harming people and property on their demand.[19] As a resident of Felsztyn in Eastern Galicia recalled: "We believed in witchcraft, witches, old lame *goyes*, who are able to take away milk from a cow, or even from a nursing mother. *Goyes*, who can tap milk from a wall, exorcise the evil eye, remove a disease. People believed that they possess many secret remedies, and nobody was ashamed to use those

[17] Gutmacher 1875, pp. 16b-17a.
[18] Rosenberg 1913, pp. 3-16.
[19] Piątkowska 1897, p. 809.

bizarre advises and remedies, even if sorcery was directly forbidden by the Torah."[20] The acts of *maleficia* ascribed to the witches also resembled notions deeply rooted in the Germanic-Slavic borderland. One of the most often expressed reasons for hiding clipped nails and hair, objects supposedly used in black magic rituals, was a fear of being bewitched. According to Regina Lilientalowa's informants, to turn a man blind, a witch would pass her victim's hair through the eye of a frog, and release the animal soon after the ritual. Neutralization of such menaces was quite simple; the same informants stated that it was enough to bring a drop of blood from a person suspected of practicing witchcraft (with a pin-prick, for instance) for the curse to be lifted.[21]

In a Hebrew manuscript dated from the 19th century one can find three incantations aimed at bringing relief to a patient suffering from a strong migraine called a *heyptgeshpar* or *heybtshayn*. All those texts were written in old Yiddish with a strong German influence, however their presence in sources originating from the Eastern Europe suggests at least some knowledge of this medical condition among Jews in the Slavic lands. The *heybtshayn*, which can probably be regarded as identical with German *Hauptschein*, was treated mainly by means of magic. One of the incantations noted in the manuscript recalls the popular exorcism focused on Lilith – a female demon or a witch. The incantation takes the form of a dialogue between the demon (in other variants also referred to as: *Malke Shvo*, *Astaribo*, *Astarihu*, etc.) and the prophet Elijah, while the formula was meant to be reinforced by binding the patient's head with his own belt.[22] Indeed, German folklore explained the etiology of sudden strong headaches in connection with witches, namely as a result of a spell being cast (*Geschoss*).[23] The concept of a spell causing pain in various parts of the human body was widespread since the late Middle Ages, mirrored in the literature (e.g. Ulrich Molitor) through representations of witches shooting arrows. Such names as *Hexenschuss*[24] or Polish *postrzał* did, in fact, survive in modern biomedical terminology, though their origins faded from the memory of present generations. A very similar incantation, including the act of binding the head, can also be found in a booklet published by Israel Yudl Goldberg and Avraham Aba Eisenberg in Jerusalem. The disease is not mentioned there by its German name, but the text is written in modern Eastern European Yiddish.[25]

The traditional Jewish population did not always directly express a belief in witches' spells sent with the wind to cause *Geschoss*. Nevertheless, a careful examination of Hebrew and Yiddish sources in comparison with other non-Jewish traditions brings a more complex picture of the phenomenon. In a story of one of Baal Shem Tov's numerous duels against sorcerers, a wicked *kishuf-makher* (in *Shivchei ha-Besht* a gentile woman) is presented as using the devil to steal money from a local Jewish *arendar*. Furious at the sorcerer for sending him into a trap, he eventually turns against his master and kills two of man's children. This devil is called by different names, including *a ruekh*, a Hebrew

[20] Kling 1937, p. 561.
[21] Lipietz 1890, p. 105; Lilientalowa 1905, p. 151.
[22] HS. ROS. 444, 9b.
[23] *Geschoss* in Hoffmann-Krayer, Bächtold-Stäubli 1974, p. 756.
[24] *Hexenschusz* in Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm, http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemma=hexenschusz (access: July 25, 2015).
[25] Goldberg, Eisenberg 1880/81, 7b.

word (*ruach*) meaning both (evil) soul and wind.[26] It seems reasonable to assume that the story combines two popular notions about spell-casting: first, that the spell is usually sent with the wind, and second, that witchcraft is possible only as a result of demonic assistance.

According to notions found in Slavic folklore, shared in many aspects by the Jewish population, demons of land, fields and forests, but also sorcerers and witches, were responsible for sudden "wind diseases." Folk culture ascribed various demonic attributes to the wind. The phenomenon of a whirlwind, for instance, was interpreted as a play of impure forces, a *sheydim-tants* (demons' dance) or a *sheydim-khasene* (demons' wedding, in Polish: *czarcie wesele*). As was noted by early ethnographers, if someone stuck a knife into the whirlwind, they could expect to see blood dripping from the vortex and the act itself significantly raised the risk of supernatural revenge. Jewish parents used to warn their children not to mention the word *khasene* after sunset, probably referring to the same belief.[27] It is essential to add that among Eastern Slavs the term *postrel* or *prostel* (again: *Geschoss*) applied also to paralysis and apoplexy.[28] Certainly, wind was the element associated with similar medical conditions also in traditional Ashkenazi culture, and that very fact reverberated in such Yiddish terms as: *vind*, *luft*, *a guter luft*, *tsug* etc. The same can be said about thunder. The word *shlak* or *shlag*, present in Yiddish and other Eastern European languages, was generally explained as a symptom of epilepsy, apoplexy or paralysis, caused by a sudden and strong air blast or thunder.[29] In the popular imagination apoplexy and sudden death (Yiddish *mise-meshune*, Hebrew *mitah meshunah*) merged into one idea of "capturing disease" (*farkhapenish*, *oyskhapenish*). In Tomaszów Lubelski it was believed that a young man has been "captured" (*gekhapt gevorn*) because he provoked demons. Working at a cemetery, he did not fulfill his part of mutual agreement, and consequently became partially paralyzed.[30] The Yiddish language preserved some picturesque curses applying to this belief, for example: *A farkhapenish zolstu krign* (you should get captured)[31], *Khapt zey a duner* (a thunder should capture them)[32] or *Zol im khapn a mise-meshune* (apoplexy should capture him).

One of the main characteristics of witches and sorcerers was the ability to alter shape. Under the new form, notably of an animal, they were said to sneak after dark into Jewish houses, to hurt or kidnap small children. In a legend recorded in Eastern Galicia – in other variants associated also with the Baal Shem Tov – a local Polish landlord (or priest) kidnapped children while under the guise of a black tomcat.[33] In a story recorded by Leo Wiener, the son of an impoverished Jewish entrepreneur finds himself in Odessa in service of the pope (*poypst* in Yiddish). In the story, the pope is characterized by unusual features: not only the fact of his living in a Russian port city instead of Rome, but above all by his ability of shapeshifting: "Der poyps ot ongioybm fortsushteln fin zikh

[26] *Shivchei Baal Shem Tov im Sipurei Anshei Shem*, 1930, pp. 24-25; *Sefer sziwchej haBeszt*, p. 74.

[27] Ch. 1898, p. 437; Buchbinder 1909, p. 252; cf. Moszyński 1934, pp. 179-180, 476.

[28] Moszyński 1934, p. 288.

[29] Linde 1859, p. 594.

[30] Farber 1949, p. 181; Lejbowicz 1965, pp. 450-451. For an interesting incantation against *luft*, cf. Goldberg, Eisenberg 1880/81.

[31] Ch. 1898, p. 437.

[32] Czerniak 1965, p. 101; Stuchkow 1991, p. 410; Harkavy 2006, p. 504.

[33] Benczer 1893, pp. 120-121.

farsheydene zakhn: si givorn fin im a ferd, a helfant, a leyb, a kats, ales in der velt" (The pope started to display various aspects: he became a horse, an elephant, a lion, a cat, everything).[34] In fact, some ethnographical sources stated that for this reason, (black) cats and dogs were kept outside and were not welcome to cross the threshold after dark.[35]

In European folklore shapeshifting was commonly attributed to werewolves. The famous story about Baal Shem Tov's encounter with a werewolf (*valkilak*) do not reveal almost any feature of this beast aside from how horrified the children left under Besht's care were, and the fact that the creature died after receiving a blow in the head. Still the author described clearly that the werewolf was in fact a non-Jewish sorcerer whose body appeared on the same spot soon after the fight. Moreover, this sorcerer obtained his wicked power through the intervention of Satan.[36] Witches depicted in most Christian sources were able to change into beasts, or merely use their help in various situations. According to another short narrative about the founder of Hasidism published in Yiddish in the booklet *Kohol hasidim* (Lemberg 1875), an encounter with a sorcerer turned into a public battle in which both sides invoked supernatural animals to hurt the opponent. This time the Baal Shem Tov's rival was a Polish landlord, who "used to kill at least one baby a week," and the fight engaged also their followers and disciples. The landlord sent various beasts to attack the Besht, including fire spitting wild boars (*vilde khazeyrim un fun zeyere piskes hobn zey gevorfn fayer*), but he could not breach the magic circle that protected the group of Hasidim. By the end of the story it is instead the Baal Shem Tov who uses animals: two roes appear and pick out the landlord's eyes, leaving him alive but defenseless, to witness the greatness of Jewish God.[37]

Sorcerers and witches were seen as dangerous also after death, as they could turn into vampires. The idea that *estries* suck human blood appeared already in *Sefer Hasidim* (464), later to become the main motive of the aforementioned exorcism, the dialog between Lilith and the prophet Elijah. Children born with teeth, according to various sources, were destined to turn into murderers[38] or witches,[39] and after death buried face down,[40] in a manner recalling a "vampire" burial. The same belief found its expression through eastern European social context, recorded in brief but meaningful descriptions. During a landlord's funeral in Berezyna a Jewish woman performed a special protective ritual on her child by lifting it above her head and saying "Du in der heykh, er in der nider, morgn a pgire vider" (You up, he down, tomorrow dies again).[41] In Mława, if a non-Jewish neighbor died, a special formula was used, very similar to popular exorcisms intended to drive demons away from the *orbis interior*: "Zol er dort arumfliyen iber felder un velder, iber viste midbories on yidishn shodn" (Let him fly out there, in fields and woods, in hollow deserts, without Jewish harm).[42]

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[34] Wiener 1902, p. 104.

[35] Benczer 1893, pp. 120-121; Cahan 1927/28, pp. 229-230; 1938, p. 291; Silverman-Weinreich 1997, p. 73.

[36] *Sefer sziwchej haBeszt*, p. 48.

[37] *Kohol Hasidim*: 18b-19a.

[38] Lilientalowa 2007, pp. 30.

[39] Lew 1897, p. 363.

[40] Lilientalowa 1904, p. 109; cf. Judah he-Hasid 1934/35, p. 136.

[41] Silverman-Weinreich 1955, p. 33.

[42] Junis 1950, p. 69.

Yet folk demonology was never a science. Differences between charms, demons, and other residents of the underworld (the angel of death, the devil) were largely blurred, leaving us with reports of ambiguous character. The same magical text could be used against the evil eye, a demon (*nisht-guter*), and a witch. Such abilities were ascribed by sources to a well-known Yiddish formula, *Orene borene dembene korene veytsene klayen*.[43] It is interesting to note that the formula itself might have been derived from Slavic acts of exorcism ("na góry, na bory, na suche korzenie"), where it was used to drive the "dark side" out from the human environment.

Folk beliefs of non-Jewish origin, although generally associated with *goyim*, nevertheless came into dialog with Jewish ethics. This dialog was not limited to a general condemnation of "black magic." It also presented the circumstances of bewitching and acts of sorcery in a didactic way, leaving aside the sinful and impure nature of witchcraft to focus on the potential moral advantages that such encounters trigger. This happened particularly often in Hasidism. A story devoted to the Rebbe of Velednik (Weledniki) in Ukraine recounts an incident involving a Hasid who suffered from strong headache but finally found the cure thanks to his master's reprimand. Meeting the poor soul the Tsaddik soon recognized the real explanation of the disease – the man had actually been bewitched – as well as the reason for his susceptibility to the witch's spell. The Hasid had been the victim of a *kishuf* because he lived together in one house with a gentile, and had a sexual relationship with the gentile's wife. After revealing the whole truth about his sin, the Hasid changed his conduct and "recovered after a few days."[44] Stories about witches and sorcerers might have been additionally used to ground innovations in customs of Ashkenaz, that is, in the sphere closely related with religious observance. According to another Hasidic legend, the Baal Shem Tov introduced changes to legitimate ablution practices – especially the frequency of the *tevilah* – not only to bring his followers closer to God, but also to protect them from sorcery. A non-Jewish shepherd once revealed that his own grandfather, also a shepherd (*owczarz*) and a sorcerer, lost all his powers on the very day of the Besht's fundamental invention.[45]

Demonic diseases

Up until the 20th century traditional Jewish culture preserved mythical concepts of how diseases appeared in the world. According to the Talmud, before the time of Abraham there was no old age, and until the time of Jacob nobody died after being sick. Diseases came into being only due to the prayers of the latter, who begged God to warn him of impending death. Because Jacob wanted to deliver dying words to his children (Bereshit 47, 29-49, 32), the Lord sent a disease on him as a visible sign of what is coming (Baba Metzia 87a). But Hebrew and Yiddish sources, seeking ways to understand the existence of sickness, also reproduced legends common in European and Slavic milieus. A vision of the dawn of mankind, based on the Biblical story of the first couple, presented the

[43] Linetski 1897, p. 30; Ehrlich 1919, p. 59; Lilientalowa 1924, p. 268; 2007, p. 56.
[44] Rotner 1901, p. 54.
[45] Meisels 2009, p. 139.

bodies of Adam and Eve covered with skin "smooth as a fingernail" (Genesis Rabba 20, p. 12).[46] This skin, a universal protection from the elements as well as diseases, was lost in a result of their sin. The notion of a fingernail skin circulated systematically in medical contexts, expressed in printed and handwritten collections. Eve's mischievous act was invoked to justify warnings that stepping on scattered nails may cause a miscarriage.[47] If a sick person glanced at his own nails, this gesture was perceived by family members as a symptom of impending death.[48] Finally, a Yiddish saying stated, "Look at your nails, and you will stop laughing," communicating this anxiety in the most literal way.[49]

In many other legends and tales maladies took human form and roamed the world in a manner typical for demons. They also settled down in inhabited areas, suffering cold and hunger together with their human hosts. Such narratives were well known in Christian Europe at least since the early Middle Ages, and were still present in Slavic folklore at the turn of the 20th century. According to a folk tale noted by a Jewish resident from Siemiatycze, a louse and a fever once sought a new place to live. Encountering a peasant working on a field they decided to attach to him. However, while for the louse peasant's clothes turned out to be a paradise, the fever did not feel well in his weary body. Therefore she ran away and found a new home in a body of a *poretz*. Since then, peasants suffer from lice and landlords from fever.[50]

The model of disease formed within premodern cultures and still present in Eastern European folklore at the beginning of the last century involved an image of separate entities whose existence remained closely intertwined with human life. Creatures that manifested their presence in one's body with certain symptoms (pain, swelling, redness etc.) reflected natural phenomena known to humans from the environment affecting animals, trees, and plants, as well as inanimate objects (rocks, rivers, etc.). Virtually everything that happened before human eyes could be reinterpreted through the prism of relations between macrocosm and microcosm, the world and the body; eventually the outer world became a synonym of events experienced within the body itself. But diseases, due to their demonic condition, were also depicted as strangers, and consequently could be chased out from their victims by anti-demonic means. One Yiddish incantation printed in *Sefer lachashim u-segulot* illustrates the magical scheme of the dialogue between the prophet Elijah and Lilith. In this case, however, it is focused on eradicating from the patient's body a *shtekh*, the feeling of an acute pain similar to "stinging."[51] Other ethnographic sources preserved, for instance, an incantation used by the local Jewish population (in Ruthenian language), that addressed *zvikh* (a demon of limb dislocation) not to be mean, break bones, etc.[52] Those are just two of many examples, where diseases took the form of demonic creatures in Jewish magical texts.

The anthropomorphization of misfortunes affecting the body initiated simultaneously a variety of consequences for healing practices. The traditional population believed that, as in the case of a physical assault, the most powerless against diseases were small chil-

[46] In other traditions also with corneous skin or fur: Zowczak 2013, pp. 97-98.
[47] Lipietz 1890, p. 83; Wilff 1906, p. 100; Buchbinder 1909, p. 250.
[48] Lilientalowa 1904, p. 106.
[49] Chajes 1928, p. 308.
[50] Czerniak 1964, p. 31; cf. Brückner 1902, p. 104.
[51] Goldberg, Eisenberg 1880/81, 9a; Heller 1906/07, p. 64.
[52] Maggid 1910, pp. 588-589; cf. Wereńko 1896, p. 200.

dren, especially those yet to develop teeth, a natural tool of defense. In contrast, many ailments could not affect a man who had reached adulthood or at least who had crossed a symbolic barrier between infancy and a childhood (the barrier marked by *rites de passage*). Thus, older children were usually not separated from their younger siblings infected with *krup* (croup), in the belief that nothing threatened them.[53] The demonic character of diseases ravaging the human body led to creation of a rich catalogue of methods intended to mislead, intimidate, bribe, or starve the unwanted guest. The first treatment applied to a sick Jew by his entourage in the Belarusian shtetl of Davidgorodok was a strict diet.[54] In case a patient was suffering from fever (Yiddish *kadokhes*), one was supposed to drench him with cold water at a time he did not expect it – not only to lower the temperature of the heated body, but also to scare off the disease.[55] Before many types of ailments that "hung around people" the traditional population protected itself – successfully or not – by displaying on doorposts a dedicated information, e.g. "The fever, whooping cough, measles where already here."[56]

Quite commonly – although not against all diseases – the methods aimed to scare off the intruder included shaking, beating and "chopping" (Polish *rąbać*). Among actions undertaken in the face of childhood convulsions, as stated in ethnographic documents, at least one source recommends holding the child by its head and hitting its lame legs several times against the entry doorpost (a place of powerful symbolic meaning in the house, reinforced by the presence of a *mezuzah*).[57] "Chopping" was used primarily in the event of disease called *ripkukhn* or *ripkikhn* in the vernacular. Jewish sources explained this term as a synonym of a bloated or swelled spleen or liver, a pathological state associated sometimes with *englishe krenk* (rickets).[58] Its name, however, came into Yiddish from German culture, where *Rieb-Kuchen* meant, among other symptoms, the feeling of "hardness in the side."[59] The act of "chopping" itself was described in Yiddish as *hakn a ripkuchn* and resembled therapeutic measures undertaken in Slavic lands (e.g. Belarus) against a malady known as *hryź*, interpreted as a kind of hernia caused by a demonic creature that "bites" into the human flesh.[60] The method consisted of beating with a cleaver (or a batting-staff, *kijanka*) a sick child lying on the doorstep and covered with a kneading board or similar item. The whole operation, repeated three days in the row, was accompanied by a dialogue across the doorstep: "What are you chopping?" "*Ripkuchn*." "With what are you chopping?" "With a cleaver" "Then chop better". Or, in a different version: "What are you chopping?" "Kra!" "Then chop into smithereens."[61]

The idea of scaring off a disease with an act of violence was also demonstrated in the ritual of *paslen* ('to prohibit' or 'to disqualify', from Hebrew *pasal*), undertaken mainly

[53] Lilientalowa 2007, p. 69.
[54] Neumann 1957, p. 423.
[55] Segel 1894, p. 325; Lilientalowa 1930, p. 12; cf. Haur 1793, p. 12.
[56] Segel 1894, p. 321; Lew 1898a, p. 530.
[57] Segel 1897, p. 56.
[58] Chotsh 1703, p. 9; Halpern 1858, p. 44a; Rosenberg c. 1920, p. 23; Alfabet 1924, p. 70; Opatoszu 1941, p. 119; Lilientalowa 2007, p. 65.
[59] Crato 1690, p. 199; cf. *Kuchen*, *Kuche*, in Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm, http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemma=kuchen (access: July 25, 2015).
[60] Wereńko 1896, p. 151; Moszyński 1934, p. 201.
[61] Lew 1897b, p. 407; Alfabet 1924, p. 63; Lilientalowa 2007, p. 65.

over a suffering child. The mother was supposed to break a clay jug, pot, or plate above a patient stretched on a floor (or lying in a cradle) and covered with a kneading board. The use of kneading board in both practices seems very symbolic. The tool known in Yiddish by its Slavic name (*diezhe*, *deyzhe*), used in the processes of baking bread, emanated magical potential. Remains of dough scraped directly from the board could have been used as a remedy against *suchote* (consumption).[62] One can also trace a notable dispute within Jewish sources of whether such remains, or water left after kneading, should be used as a *segulah* to fasten a child's memory.[63]

The term *paslen* itself appeared in the Ashkenzi folklore also in two other rituals. Traditional community believed that certain diseases, primarily those related with "the evil eye," can be "convinced" to leave the sick body if it is washed in urine. In the less intrusive variant the patient's mother was supposed to pour water into a chamber pot and then smear it into child's face, repeating this action, just in case, with every other young member of the family.[64] Another popular version of this ritual advised a woman simply to urinate on the child laid on the ground – the act called *paslen a krankn*.[65] A slightly different, but nevertheless important protective measure used in many homes was *paslen di kats*, that consisted in cutting tips of cat's ears and tail. Cats, as already mentioned, were very often identified as creatures of the night, transformed figures of witches and sorcerers. A widespread belief of the rural Slavic population also suggested that black-furred animals may prevent a witch from entering the house in which they are kept. In order to be suitable for the role of a guardian, the cat had to be deprived of the potentially dangerous parts of its body, namely its ears and particularly the tail – which was compared to a symbolic sting and a reservoir of venom and "evil" – as they were supposed to gather impure elements.[66] The blood from the black cat's tail (male or female accordingly to patient's sex) became one of the most prominent *segulot*, visible not only in ethnographic surveys, but also on the pages of printed and handwritten medical collections. It functioned as a remedy against rose (various kinds of redness on skin, Yiddish *royz*, Polish *róża*), as well as means to lessen and shorten a child's suffering during teething. In some areas (e.g. Pińczów) cat's blood was believed to be so powerful, and at the same time so demonic, that only men were allowed to benefit from its effectiveness.[67]

Some diseases, however, were actually perceived as important for human wellbeing, or even able to act as a sort of special protection. A patient was keen to accept their presence in his or her body, to avoid more onerous misfortunes. One of the most prevalent diseases of such nature among the Jewish population in the Eastern Europe was *kolten* (Polish *kołtun*), known in the early modern medicine as *Plica polonica*. In case of this malady, Jews shared the vast majority of beliefs of their Slavic neighbors and, to some extent, the contemporary medical literature. Among Slavs *kołtun* was interpreted as internal rather than external disease, also called by its other name – *gościec* – "a guest in bones." It was seen as a creature capable of causing rheumatic pains, but rather mild and

[62] Rosenberg 1911, p. 43.

[63] Grunwald 1923, p. 205; Sosnovik 1924, p. 165; Landau 1924, p. 332; Rechtman 1962, p. 263.

[64] Landau 1924, pp. 330-331.

[65] Segel 1897, p. 60; Lilientalowa 2007, p. 58.

[66] Segel 1894, p. 324; Robinsohn 1897, p. 48; Sosnovik 1924, p. 164; Ben-Ezra 1949, p. 175. Cf. Gustawicz 1881, p. 130; Libera 1995, p. 133.

[67] MS 10082, 6b; Himmelblau 1970, p. 218; Lilientalowa 2007, pp. 46, 68; cf. Haur 1793, p. 127.

harmless if brought out in a form of matted, sticky hair. Contemporary medics and first representatives of biomedicine divided this phenomenon into two separate cases. *Kołtun*, "a terrible suffering of hair" was something different than *gościec*, which manifested itself by "shooting pain in the limbs."[68] Such an interpretation was also present in Hebrew medical literature created in the enlightened circles of Ashkenazi Jewry.[69] Nevertheless, Jewish folk medicine explained the malady's nature in accordance with popular beliefs of Slavic folklore, where *kołtun* or *gościec* was not only a medical concept, but also the name of a demon. In some nineteenth-century Hebrew manuscripts it is possible to trace magical exorcisms depicting "impure forces called *koltens,* that is plait, and all nine kinds of impurity, that is *gostits*."[70] Other sources also suggest the possibility that the disease originated from a spell cast by a witch.[71]

At the same time the growing of matted hair could have been a fully conscious attempt to secure aid of "the guest." In rabbinic responses there are references proving that some Jewish practitioners of healing advocated cultivating *kolten* as a therapeutic agent, for example, through sprinkling one's hair with ash.[72] This was supposed to eliminate rheumatic pains caused by the creature itself, but also to "rid of" such nuisances as headache[73] or rose.[74] However, the new ally was capricious, as was the case with demonic creatures. From its host's mouth it demanded fulfillment of specific desires. Therefore mother of a child with *Plica* was obliged to submit to her offspring's wishes, not to provoke the demon to twist patient's limbs in case of a refusal. Also removal of the matted hair, that is the external manifestation of *kolten*'s presence, was generally out of the question, due to the negative consequences it was supposed to bring, including blindness and other types of permanent damage to health.[75] Rabbi Akiva Eiger described the case of a married woman who cut off her hair and went mad soon after.[76] A method of removing *kolten* from one's head that nevertheless appeared in ethnographic surveys was usually accompanied by means of additional restrictions. It was possible to heal the disease at a specific time of day, preferably before sunrise, by burning *Plica* near the skin and letting it fall off.[77] In the case of child's head it was also possible for the mother to bite off the plait.[78] Other sources recommended that during this precarious treatment the patient should be immersed up to his neck in water, forming a symbolic barrier against evil.[79]

Similar to those of *kolten* were the symptoms of a disease called by Hebrew and Yiddish sources *ciemienik*, in Polish folklore described as *ciemieniucha* or *ognipiór*, and usually identified with "milk crust" (a crusty skin rash on baby's scalp)[80] or *Milchschorf*

[68] Majer, Skobel 1835, p. 13.
[69] E.g. Lefin 1851, p. 84a.
[70] HS. ROS. 444, 6b.
[71] MS 10082, 2b.
[72] Zimmels 1952, p. 99. Children were not allowed to put sieve on one's head because it was supposed to cause *parch* (scab): Buchbinder 1909, p. 258.
[73] Lilientalowa 2007, p. 62.
[74] *Ibid*., p. 68.
[75] Lew 1897a, p. 382; Lilientalowa 2007, pp. 62, 68.
[76] Zimmels 1952, p. 99.
[77] Lilientalowa 1921, p. 12.
[78] Weissenberg 1903, p. 316.
[79] Lilientalowa 1905, p. 173; Rosenberg 1911, p. 96.
[80] Or "cradle cap."

in German.[81] *Ciemienik*, just as its better known counterpart, was also seen as in some way beneficial for child's health. If irritated, it could end with "fire", and finally affect the sufferer's eyes, causing blindness. The Jewish folklore situated this malady among misfortunes caused by Lilith or demons (*mazikim*). As an unwanted guest in child's body, it could be eradicated with magical incantations. The text of a Yiddish exorcism against *ciemienik* published in *Sefer lachashim u-segulot* contains typical elements used to deprive the demon of its power and force him to "dry out like knot in a wood" (*azoy a suk in a holts*). The exorcism was also reinforced by a characteristic phrase that had been present in Ashkenazi magical practices at least since the Middle Ages: "with the name of the Holy God, His Ten Commandments, Ten Generations and Ten Torah Scrolls."[82] This fact clearly demonstrates how advanced the process of adaptation of Slavic ideas into a long-lasting tradition of Jewish demonology and magic could become.

Another example of a creature existing in human body, was a *hartsvorem* (a heart worm). Vermin in general constituted a very specific category of parasites that affected men, women, and especially children. In popular imagination they were associated with snakes, particularly with the one from Gan Eden, and thus seen as creatures of the "other side." It is also not without significance that vermin occupied spaces generally described as demonic: dark, uninhabited and foul smelling. Remedy actions undertaken against variously described worms very often took the form of a magical ritual. Yiddish manuscripts and printed materials provide numerous examples of incantations intended to eradicate parasites from a patient's body, and some of these texts have an obvious Germanic, Slavic, or Latin character. The idea of a worm-like creature living in the human heart and necessary for life, known in German folklore as *Herzwurm*, was widespread in Central and Eastern Europe. Provoked by human actions it could cause a general feeling of nausea, stomach problems etc. Specific incantations aimed to expel parasites – sometimes attributed to the Hassidic Rabbi Moses Teitelbaum (1759-1841) of Sieniawa (Galicia) and Sátoraljaújhely (Hungary) – involved a unique condition that they do not directly address this particular worm.[83] Jewish sources generally do not broaden the knowledge on its nature, though Yiddish everyday expression *es grizhet/nogt vi a vorem in hartsn* ("it bites/tires like a worm in the heart") – metaphorically describing psychological discomfort – shows that the belief widespread in Eastern Ashkenaz. In modern culture the same idea still echoes in expressions like "drowning the worm," used in both Polish and Yiddish literature and meaning: to seek solace in alcohol.[84]

[81] *Milchgrind, Milchschorf*, in *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemma=milchgrind (access: July 25, 2015).

[82] Goldberg, Eisenberg 1880/81, 5b-6a.

[83] HS. ROS. 444, 7a; MS 10082, 9b; Goldberg, Eisenberg 1880/81, 9b (Hebrew *tolaa[t] ha-lev*); Rubinstein c. 1930, 69a; Meir Benet 1958/59, 75a.

[84] E.g. "Hot men zich cezect un genumen cijen fun fleszl, fartrinken dem worem, wos hot ejbik genogt" (They sat down and began to drink from bottles, to drown the worm, that had always tormented): Berlinski 1947, p. 27; "Er hot noch opgetretn in a szenk, fartrunken dem worem wos toczet in im biz wejtik" (Yet he entered the tavern, drowned the worm that tortured him to pain): Knapheis 1960, p. 89.

Conclusions

The article covers merely an extract of the wide range of problems related to the topic of Jewish-Slavic intercultural contacts. Still, it allows us to trace an important, although rather neglected dimension. Popular notions of demons and witchcraft may not be an obvious choice for such studies given the folkloristic character of the material presented. Further, most of the sources used in this paper originated in the 19th or even 20th centuries, whereas the genealogy of beliefs in witches and demonic forms of disease stretches back at least to the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, for hundreds of years demons and witches played a prominent role in the worldview of most Europeans. Even the dawn of the Enlightenment did not drastically change this situation, and it took a few generations – and at least another century – to shift the vector of human speculation. Traditional Jewish culture in Eastern Europe retained the memory of these deep-rooted concepts and expressed them in stories about Hasidic Rebbes in medical explanations and measures. It also adapted ideas popular among non-Jewish neighbors, nannies, farmhands, and other representatives of the traditional Slavic population who participated in the life of a shtetl. From scattered clues and a small number of definitive descriptions it is still possible to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of those beliefs, and, consequently to trace their Jewish and/or Slavic origins.

Popular demonology was an important sphere of pre-modern cosmology, and one that accommodated intensive mutual contacts. Within this contact zone, ideas prevalent in the Christian vernacular, although not always specifically Christian in content, shaped the worldview of the traditional Jewish community. It is why we find complex, shared ideas about the "dark side," on both sides of the alleged "virtual wall" separating the two groups. This process of cultural osmosis started very early, probably as soon as the Jewish diaspora put down roots in western German lands, and continued generation after generation under various circumstances in the Polish and later Ukrainian and Belarusian provinces. Even if this lore indeed made the impact, according to Shmeruk's words, "by oral transmission alone,"[85] its influence exceeded the limits of locality. Such subjects as witchcraft or demons created space for an intensive discourse, whether at home, in a tavern or in a bakery – everywhere the contact took place. Borrowings restricted to a specific area or even a single household, in the course of time made, however, an indelible imprint on the broader communal wisdom and custom. In fact, this lore did eventually find its way into Hebrew and Yiddish books, constituting an important component of *musar* literature, *sifrei segulot u-refuot*, and Hasidic hagiography, and flourishing in Jewish memories and *sifrei izkor*, although this time due to completely different motivations. The presence of non-Jewish beliefs in Ashkenazi culture should not be, therefore, the subject of exclusively literary studies, just as the sources of intercultural contact that gave rise to it should not be seen reductively in narrow terms.

But despite the fact that non-Jewish beliefs penetrated the Jewish diaspora so extensively, becoming symbols of Ashkenazi identity that were simultaneously both very much local but distinctly Jewish, they also underwent considerable change. The process of adaptation of foreign content took various forms, not always requiring any visible

[85] Shmeruk 1985, p. 47.

transformations. The most evident aspect of this phenomenon was the partial or complex translation of a magical text, an adaptation that could nevertheless entirely omit the level of language, as oral transmission obviated popular illiteracy in Latin or Cyrillic alphabets (in case of Ashkenazi Jewry). Motives and symbols present in the Christian milieu, repeated in different religious and social contexts, acquired new threads, new figures, and new purposes in the Jewish context. Some stories about Jewish struggles against witches, sorcerers, or demonic diseases may have sounded familiar to a gentile ear (and did, as we can discern from many examples). But others might not, whether because of their complex dialog with Jewish tradition, their location in a hermetic new language (for Slavic Christians), or even their stereotypic tone.

The traditional Ashkenazi community also had its own diversity of types who talked about demons and witches, and who listened or turned the stories into a written text. In fact, what we know about the popular cosmology of Eastern European Jewry depends greatly on what we can glean from written testimonies. To understand its complexity we would do well to take a fresh look, to retrieve symbols and cross-cultural ties not fully expressed in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, but nevertheless popular in the common imagination. Such an understanding is possible only if we notice the fundamental meanings of ideas and beliefs that originated centuries earlier in European culture to become an emblematic idiom of non-Jewish and Jewish folklore alike.

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